Making Social Sector Apprenticeships Part of the College Experience

Eric Schwarz cofounded Citizen Schools in 1995 to offer Boston students living in low-income communities the opportunity to participate in apprenticeships in a variety of careers. Twenty years later, Citizen Schools has served more than 50,000 mostly middle-school students in seven states coast-to-coast, engaging some 40,000 volunteer "Citizen Teachers" in the process.

Schwarz, who retired recently as CEO of Citizen Schools, sat down with Bridgespan Partner Katie Smith Milway to reflect on his Citizen Schools experience and talk about his new venture, College for Social Innovation, which he describes as "something kind of like Citizen Schools but at the college level." Here are highlights from their conversation.

Can you describe briefly what Citizen Schools does and why it's important?

The achievement gap between upper- and lower-income kids is actually getting bigger. And it's not that lower-income kids are learning less. They're actually learning a little bit more. Middle-income kids are also learning a little bit more. But upper-income kids are learning much, much, much more because of their access to out-of-school learning opportunities. Citizen Schools give lower-income kids those extra opportunities. Our basic model is to expand the learning day by 2½ to 3½ hours four to five days a week throughout the school year. It gives kids those extra opportunities in the form of "apprenticeships" where, for example, they're working with engineers from Google, business leaders from Fidelity, architects, and artists. And they're getting a taste of the kinds of experiences that our upper-income kids are increasingly taking for granted.

Why did you leave Citizen Schools?

I think it's pretty cool that Citizen Schools has grown to be a $30 million organization serving many thousands of students and we have had significant impact on policy and the extended learning field; but in terms of the size of the problem, we didn't scale to anywhere near where I hoped that we would be. So I felt that it would be the right thing for me to move on at the end of 2014 and for the organization to get a leader who would probably be better than me at scaling. And now we've got this amazing new leader, Steven Rothstein. I also was excited to work on my next venture.

You've started a new venture, College for Social Innovation. What is its mission?

My vision for this new organization, College for Social Innovation, is to make it common for college students to get at least a semester, but eventually maybe a year or two, of credit for doing apprenticeships in the social sector. They will be doing frontline service work and organization building work that will develop their skills, build their networks, and help accelerate their self-discovery.

The Peace Corp, Vista, and AmeriCorps have all created apprenticeship experiences for young people. But all three of those programs put together touch about 30,000 full-time people in a given year and maybe 50,000 part-time. We have nine million full-time college students.

Ultimately I would like to invent a new model for college, but we're beginning with a pilot program called Semester in the City. We hope to work with three colleges in the 2016–17 school year. It will be analogous to enrollment in a semester abroad program, with credit granted for an apprenticeship by the partnering institution, and most or all costs covered through allocated tuition. Except instead of going to Germany and drinking a lot of beer and taking some of the same courses they could have taken back in the United States, students will be doing something totally different that can be transformative.

How will the apprenticeship work?

Right now there's so much imbalance in the world of higher education. It's heavy on theory and light on practice. That's why the apprenticeship model is so valuable. But of course it would be much better if we could link theory and practice. John Dewey said that learning is reflection upon experience. And so, in addition to having semester-long service fellowships, which are 30 to 35 hours a week, we're going to offer a course one night a week that draws on case studies about impact in the social sector. And then on Fridays, all of the student interns will come together for a series of organized reflection activities and team-based projects. Over time, we want to create a lot of opportunities for students to link their experiences back to what they're learning in the classroom so that they ask better questions or even push back on a professor's theory.

Clearly we're not the only people doing this sort of thing. Northeastern University in Boston has run a co-op program for years. There are others as well, including a program in Washington, DC, called the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. But I would like to contribute to the movement towards experienced-based learning so that it becomes more main stream. In 10 to 20 years, it would be great if 10 percent or 20 or 30 percent of those nine million college students will have experienced at least a semester of high quality experience-based learning, not on top of their college experience, but baked into their college experience.

How do you see this ultimately benefitting the social sector?

If we think about all of the huge, daunting challenges that we face in the social sector, talent is the differentiator as to whether we make progress or we don't. Sure, you're not going to get rich going into the nonprofit sector, but there are a lot of good middle-class jobs available. For many first-generation college students, the nonprofit sector could be a good pathway into the middle class.

We're not developing enough talent right now in the social sector, and we can't just wish that things get better. Developing more talent has to be about catching kids when they're young. And I think the most underutilized part of our social sector talent pipeline, ironically, is college. We want the College for Social Innovation to help fill that pipeline.